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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

SUSLOV LOOKS TO THE RIGHT

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
24 April 1969

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Suslov Looks to the Right

Summary

A speech by Soviet Politburo member and party secretary Suslov on 25 March opens a number of interesting lines of speculation. Suslov has a big stake in the international Communist conference now scheduled for June. His remarks commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Comintern were undoubtedly designed to relieve some of the misgivings that the conference has aroused within many non-Soviet parties. But it was the first time a member of the post-Khrushchev leadership has criticized Stalin, a delicate matter for internal politics. Suslov's shafts were aimed specifically at Stalin's opposition to political cooperation with social democrats--a mistake that he warned must not be repeated.

The problem of how far Communist principles can be compromised for "tactical" purposes or political expediency without compromising Communism itself lies at the root of Moscow's recent difficulties with both Eastern and Western European parties. It played a significant role in the development of the USSR's difficulties with China, and it could have broad implications for the USSR's attitude toward the West.

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There is also a body of doctrinal literature on the subject, by authors who can be associated with individual Soviet leaders. A key element in the new program of Finnish Communist Party "liberals" is cooperation with social democrats, a goal that has led to their abandonment of a whole series of principles that their conservative opponents regard as the essence of Communism itself. The "liberals" have received on-again, off-again encouragement in their reform program from an important official of the Soviet central committee, Aleksey Belyakov. Belyakov himself has been constant in his sympathies for the Finnish "liberals", but he has not always had the support of his superiors. Suslov's statement on 25 March may well have been made with an eye to unity in the international Communist movement, but in addition it represented public support by Suslov for Belyakov's "liberal" views. Moreover, it followed an extremely harsh criticism of these views in the Soviet party journal, Kommunist, signed by a man believed to be a personal aide to Brezhnev.

This evidence suggests that there is considerable dissension within the Soviet leadership on substantive issues. The facts further indicate that, within the Politburo, significantly differing policy options are entertained and even pushed persistently by various advocates.

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Suslov's Comintern Speech

1. In his long review of the Comintern's history, Soviet party theoretician Suslov gave the organization full credit for its alleged achievements. He noted, however, that there had also been errors in its activity. It had not always "correctly considered the different national conditions" in which individual parties had to operate, and hence it had "occasionally" recommended courses that were "not quite sound." Also "unfortunately in its latter years, the consequences of Stalin's personality cult had an adverse effect" on Comintern activity--presumably an oblique reference to the Stalin-directed purges. Most significantly, he declared that there had been "no justification"for the thesis that the main danger to the interests of the proletariat came from social democracy. In his view, the misdirection (from 1928 to 1935) of the Communists' struggle against social democrats (rather than against the rising tide of fascism in Italy and Germany) had led to "sectarianism," a failing akin to dogmatism. These errors, he warned, must not be repeated. Finally, he noted that the "organizational form wherein leadership of the entire (Communist) movement was exercised from one center" had been overtaken by 1943 and had even become a "hindrance" to the growth of the individual parties. He stressed that "other forms" of ties between Communist parties were more appropriate for "today's conditions." He thereby sought to allay any suspicions that the international conference in June was a step along the road to a new Comintern, as some Communists have feared.

Stalin in Soviet Politics

2. Under Khrushchev, discussions of policy "mistakes" by Stalin appeared regularly in party and historical journals. These were narrow-gauge articles that examined the results of specific decisions in economic, military, agricultural, or, more rarely, foreign affairs. Usually, these articles had implications for current Soviet policies, and at a minimum served to undercut conservative objections to change.

3. With the decision of 1965 to treat Stalin "more objectively," these articles were replaced by general evaluations that stressed his "positive role" only admitting that this role had been marred by "a number of shortcomings." These formulations were so vague that they could not be interpreted as urging any specific policy course. More recently, the rule has been: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." This rule has been faithfully observed in fiction and historical literature as well as in the press.

4. A literary event in Pravda in mid-March provided the first warning that the quiet might be broken. From 12 through 15 March, Pravda carried four excerpts from Mikhail Sholokhov's unfinished novel, They Fought for the Fatherland. In the first excerpt, a character speaking in 1941 about people who had been unjustly arrested commented that Stalin had apparently been running the country "with his eyes shut, not all the time but at least since 1937." The excerpt carried the following day portrayed a general--purged in 1937 and just freed--who referred bitterly to the grim existence in the camps and promised to reveal more about his "odyssey." In the third excerpt, the general expressed his belief that Stalin had been "deliberately misinformed" by "those who were entrusted with state security. If that can justify him to some extent... " (Sholokhov's ellipsis).

5. According to one story on the Moscow rumor circuit, the conservative literary journal in Sholokhov's home town of Rostov turned down his manuscript, as did Pravda. He was informed by Pravda that his novel was too anti-Stalin, that "times have changed," and that the paper no longer printed such material. Sholokhov, who is accustomed to special privileges as a VIP, is alleged to have gone to the secretariat of the Moscow Writers Union to call Brezhnev, but was unable to get beyond Brezhnev's secretary. With that, Sholokhov exploded, saying: "Under Stalin I had no trouble like this. Khrushchev even visited me at my home when he wished to discuss literary matters."

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6. Although we have no information on the subsequent decision to publish his controversial material in Pravda, it seems highly probable that, in view of the importance of the issue, the question was decided in the Politburo. There may have been some lingering doubts in that body about the wisdom of the decision. On 19 March the Soviet news agency, Novosti, released an unusual article apparently written especially for distribution outside the Soviet Union. It warned Sholokhov's readers against "jumping to conclusions" about his views on the "Stalin cult" and against judging a novel from excerpts taken out of context.

7. On 25 March 1969 Suslov made what were the first critical references to Stalin's policies by a top Soviet leader since Khrushchev's ouster in 1964. It may have been his intent to use the Stalin issue in much the same way Khrushchev used it--as a political lever to urge adoption of a given policy course. While the impact on other Communist parties of such "historical" discussions can be inferred, it can be traced fairly clearly in the case of the Finnish party. Moreover, the course of these "discussions" offers useful insights into the shifting political tides within the Soviet leadership. The fluctuations in the encouragement that the Finnish Communist Party reformers received between 1965 and 1969 from an important Soviet central committee official should be viewed in the larger context of the variable fortunes of the Soviet economic reform, Soviet reactions to Czechoslovak "liberalization," and the USSR's attitude toward the West where backing and filling can also be inferred but not proved.

The Finnish Model

8. When Aleksey Belyakov, then a deputy head of party secretary Boris Ponomarev's International Department of the Soviet Communist Party, visited Finland in February 1965, Stalin's "error" in declaring undying hostility against social democrats had been discussed privately among historians, but it had not appeared in any Soviet publication.

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9. Soon after Belyakov's trip to Finland, however, the Soviet leaders decided that Stalin must be treated "more objectively" and that criticism such as Belyakov's could no longer be voiced publicly. Traditions and old habits then carried the day, and in May 1965, Pravda ran two editorials attacking the Finnish Social Democrats. When Belyakov returned to Helsinki in early June for another visit with the Finnish comrades, he was reproached by the "liberals" for the Soviet Union's failure to follow through on the line he had taken in February. His critics cited the two editorials that had undercut their own reform efforts and strengthened the hands of conservatives in the Finnish party.

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10. The "error" of hostility to social democrats was alluded to briefly and unexpectedly in the July 1965 issue of Political Self-Education, a Soviet journal designed primarily for lower level party officials. In an article on the then upcoming 30th anniversary of the Seventh Comintern Congress, Stalin's hostility to the social democrats before 1935 was described as a "false thesis"

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that "inflicted great harm on the Communist movement." The article was signed by two unknowns at the time--K. Shirinya and B. Leybzon. Their theme was not picked up in subsequent discussions of the celebrations. The anniversary of the Congress fell in late July and early August, but the celebration in Moscow was delayed, without explanation, until early October.

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Belyakov returned to Finland for yet another visit, and in contrast with his off-balance and defensive performance in June, once again pushed for liberalization of the Finnish party. During his visit, Kommunist #15 1965 was approved for publication by Moscow and, in view of the change in Belyakov's behavior, it is probable that he was aware of its contents when he left for Helsinki. It carried a major article on the Seventh Comintern Congress signed by Aleksey Rumyantsev which may in fact have been the "long report" he delivered on 4 October 1965. He approached the problem of Stalin's thesis cautiously, but in the end made his position plain: the pre-1935 policy had been "wrong" all along and, moreover, had had unhappy consequences for the German and Austrian Communist parties.

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Suslov Shifts

13. Belyakov made only one important visit to Finland in 1966, when he accompanied Suslov, Ponomarev, and other party officials. During that visit he was heavily outranked and was far more circumspect in his behavior.

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14. In 1967 Belyakov, still pushing "liberalization," sent two experts to evaluate the Finnish party's internal situation, especially the strength of its "liberal" wing. The two emissaries were Yury Krasin, who earlier that year had been identified as a "responsible worker" of the Soviet central committee and "consultant" to Belyakov's International Department, and Boris Leybzon, a docent at the Soviet central committee's Academy of Social Sciences. Leybzon was one of the authors of the July 1965 article on Stalin's "error" mentioned earlier. Both Leybzon and Krasin made a tremendous hit with Finland's "liberal" Communists, whom they strongly encouraged.

A Cold Wind from Kommunist

15. During his visit early in 1968, Belyakov--newly promoted to first deputy chief of his department--was cautiously encouraging toward the Finnish Communist party "liberals". He returned to Finland with Politburo member Arvid Pelshe in August 1968 at the time of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces. The Soviet delegation, which was to attend the 50th anniversary celebration of the Finnish Communist Party, arrived only to be

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told that the celebrations had been canceled. Pelshe talked with Finnish Communist Party chairman Aarne Saarinen, who strongly condemned the invasion and continued to press the "liberals'" case for continuing their line on cooperation in the light of Finnish domestic politics. The "liberals" obviously did not intend to back down, despite the Czechoslovak experience. In late 1968 Krasin accepted an invitation from the Finnish party to lecture on social science in late January and early February 1969. At the last minute, however, Krasin advised that he was "ill" and would be unable to come, and Pravda political observer V. Korionov was sent instead. Korionov quickly found common ground with the Finnish conservative Communists and annoyed the "liberals" by insisting that a compromise be reached between the two wings. The "liberals" retorted that they were the legitimate leaders, representing the vast majority of the party and that concessions to the conservative minority would not be a "compromise" but a surrender. An article by Korionov in Pravda following the visit read as if it had been written by the conservative wing of the Finnish party.

16. The contents of Kommunist #3 1969 which was authorized for publication in mid-February cast some light on the nature of Krasin's "illness." It carried an article on Soviet "historiography" signed by--among others--V. Golikov, believed to be a personal aide to Brezhnev. The article declared almost the whole of the Stalin era sacrosanct--not to be criticized. It recommended Stalin's own works as original sources for Soviet historians, and leveled extremely harsh criticism against recent works on Lenin that had suggested Lenin himself had not always been unconditionally hostile to all except pure Bolsheviks. Two of the authors most harshly attacked were Boris Leybzon and Yury Krasin. Leybzon was accused of claiming that Lenin opposed breaking with potential allies who failed to meet Bolshevik standards of doctrinal purity, and that he had actually contemplated the possibility of a single party, to include both "centrists" and "opportunists." Krasin allegedly had said that Lenin never spoke out in principle

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for a one-party monopoly of the revolution. (Both political alliance with social democrats and abandonment of the traditional demand for the leading role of the Communist party are important elements in the program of the "liberal" elements of the Finnish party.) The Kommunist authors anathematized the works of Leybzon and Krasin as "essentially defending a Trotskyite position."

Dissonant Voices Crying "Unity"

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18. On 25 March, Suslov gave his Comintern anniversary speech in which, at long last, he publicly expressed the shift in his position which had so pleased Ponomarev and Belyakov in 1966. Two days later, on 27 March, Suslov joined Brezhnev in talks with Finnish party leaders who were to brief them on the upcoming Finnish Communist Party Congress.

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19. We have no information concerning the impact of the Czechoslovak anti-Soviet demonstrations later that day on the policy positions of the top Soviet leaders. They do not appear to have affected Belyakov's attitude toward the Finnish "liberals" at all. Belyakov accompanied Politburo member Arvid Pelshe to the opening of the Finnish Communist Party Congress on 3 April.

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21. The Finnish Communist Party Congress resulted in a resounding electoral victory for the "liberals." Some of the more revisionist phrasing of the "liberals'" platform--peaceful transition to socialism, recognition of the need for a multi-party system, guarantees of full civil liberties under socialism, rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of the precondition of the leading role of the Communist party--were slightly watered down in the final version, leaving ambiguity on some points. Nevertheless, the over-all thrust of the proceedings was clearly a "liberal" victory, and one so distasteful to the Finnish conservatives that they threatened to establish a separate party. Faced with this threat, both Pelshe and Belyakov continued to back the "liberal" leadership [redacted] The 25X1
conservatives have since begun to back down on their threat and have postponed the meeting at which the question was to be decided.

Possible Implications of Suslov's Comintern Speech

22. While the Politburo was probably aware of what Suslov intended to say, his speech cannot be regarded as representing an agreed position by

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all 11 members of that body, and it has not been seconded by any of the others. Podgorny and Shelepin were out of the country at the time he gave it. Brezhnev and Polyansky were not at the Comintern anniversary celebrations. The Soviet leadership was represented at the functions by Suslov, Politburo member Pelshe, the two secretaries responsible for relations with other Communist parties--Ponomarev and Katushev. (Ponomarev in an article in the World Marxist Review that appeared on the eve of the anniversary celebration made much the same points as did Suslov in his speech.) The now honorably retired Mikoyan also put in one of his rare public appearances. His presence was more than usually appropriate, since Mikoyan while in office was an even more consistent force for liberalism than Khrushchev himself.

23. As is evident from the Finnish Communist Party model, the "mistake" Suslov chose to discuss involves the propriety of political cooperation by Communist parties with non-Communist reform elements--cooperation which can only be achieved at the cost of "bending" Communist principles. The points that he made run counter to what Brezhnev has apparently been trying to achieve since 1965 and more recently for the past year--to lead the Communist movement back to the older, "purer" ways of uncompromising hostility to everything non-Communist and to tighter control from the "center." That this has continued to be his position was evident in a Kommunist article in late February of this year attacking the suggestion that Lenin had not always been unconditionally hostile to all except pure Bolsheviks. Whether the time is 1903, 1928, or 1969, the issue is the same--how far can Communist principles be compromised for "tactical" purposes or political expediency without compromising Communism itself. This problem is at the base of Moscow's recent difficulties with both Eastern and Western European parties, it played a significant role in the development of the Soviet Union's difficulties with China, and has broad implications for the USSR's attitude toward the West.

24. As the Soviet party's chief ideologist, Suslov habitually casts his speeches in theoretical terms, leaving their political application to others. Nevertheless, he gave a very current and practical twist to his criticism of the Comintern for its failure to take into account "different national conditions" and for describing social democrats as the "main danger" by his explicit warning that these mistakes must not be repeated.

25. Czechoslovakia is, of course, the most recent case where a claim could be made that "national conditions"--strong popular support of the reform program--were not taken sufficiently into account by other Warsaw Pact members in judging the work of the Czechoslovak party. Moreover, one justification for the invasion of Czechoslovakia was the conservative charge that the reform program represented a slide away from "socialism" and into social democracy. Suslov's view that social democracy does not, after all, constitute the "main danger" thus implies at least a degree of tolerance not only for the Czechoslovak program but for most of the other experiments in Eastern Europe--a step toward polycentrism which would additionally be most welcome to Western European Communist parties as well.

26. Equally intriguing are the possible implications of his speech for Soviet relations with West Germany, where Willy Brandt's social democrats have placed their main hopes for success in this year's elections on their efforts to improve relations with the USSR. These implications were apparently not lost on East Germany's Chairman Walter Ulbricht. In his own speech at the Moscow celebration, Ulbricht pointedly clung to the old formula--that cooperation with social democrats had only been justified during the second half of the 1930s, during a time of extraordinary danger to the USSR itself. Ulbricht failed to see a similar danger now, and went to some pains to distort history in order to "prove" that the treachery and downright villainy of the social democrats went all the way back to 1921.

27. Ulbricht, of course, is particularly concerned to maintain the black image of the rival regime across the border, and needs an external "threat" to justify East Germany's "seige" discipline. Despite the fact that certain national interests of the Soviet Union could clearly be better served by a slackening of tension in central Europe, the Soviets persist in publicly branding the Bonn government as "neo-Nazi" and "revanchist." Suslov's warning against a repetition of the error of hostility to social democrats may indicate a willingness to take another look at the possibility of Soviet talks with, rather than against, the coalition in Bonn. (It might additionally be used to foster friction within the Bonn coalition.)

28. Suslov did not identify the force that in his view does represent the "main danger." One possiblity, of course, is "imperialism" as distinct from Western European social democracy. Suslov's speech, however, was curiously low-key in its almost perfunctory references to "capitalism" and "imperialism," neither of which he ever identified geographically. There was certainly nothing in it comparable to the speech on 21 March by Petr Shelest, a member of the Politburo and head of the Ukrainian party. Speaking, it is true, to a military audience, Shelest warned that "the imperialists are intensifying their aggression in Vietnam, in the Near East, and in other regions. The United States supports and helps the Israeli aggressors in every way, adding tension to the already tense situation. In West Germany the neo-fascist forces are growing more and more active. They openly raise the question of revision of frontiers fixed as a result of the last war."

29. Shelest also had some harsh words for the "Mao clique," primarily because it "helps the Bonn revanchists in their provocations." He seemed uneasy lest someone draw wrong conclusions from the international situation but did not specify what these wrong conclusions might be. Belyakov in early March, however, was quite explicit--the

real Soviet problem in his view is China, which is "not a Communist country but a nationalist fascist state." Suslov, by failing to identify the current "main danger" while drawing attention to historical parallels with the rise of Hitler in the 1930s at least left open the possibility that he shares Belyakov's view.

30. While any or all of the above issues may have formed part of the background of Suslov's speech, this is by no means proven. Even if they did, a dispute within the leadership could subside without significantly affecting policy. In fact, a decision was reached, on the one hand, to crack down on the restive Czechoslovaks, although, on the other, the "liberal" Finnish Communist Party elements have been upheld. This situation does illustrate clearly, however, that the Soviet leaders disagree among themselves, not just over personal power but on issues of substance. The evidence further suggests that, within the Politburo, significantly different policy options are entertained and even pushed with persistence.

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